

## **CAIRNS ROUNDTABLE – ECOFISH**

Ecofish is a non-profit organisation representing the seafood and marine industry in Far North Queensland. Ecofish is committed to ensuring the industry actively pursues world's best ecologically sustainable fishing practices. The group or industry cluster was established in 1999 to ensure the industry's long-term environmental sustainability and to maximise the economic benefits to the region. The members of Ecofish are a mix of fishers, fish processors, wholesalers and retailers, chandleries, slipways, engineers, paint and fuel distributors, other support services such as legal and financial and Government agencies.

In most cases, clusters are formed to achieve economies of scale, acquire new technologies and enter new markets through greater industry collaboration; however, the principal motivational factor in the initial stages for the fishing and marine cluster was the threat of Government regulation to the on-going viability of northern fisheries. As a result, much of the initial stages of the cluster focussed on survival rather than the conventional developmental issues.

Ecofish is also strongly involved in promoting the industry through school group industry visits, raising money for charity, its website and educational material.

### The Future of Fishing

Ecofish is the future of fishing and is committed to:

- Securing long-term participation in Far North Queensland Fisheries.
- Raising the awareness and understanding of the importance of the industry to the regional economy.
- Ensuring the industry actively pursues world's best ecologically sustainable fishing practices.
- Working with educational bodies to improve industry training opportunities and standards and to develop attractive career opportunities.
- Establishing Ecofish as the informed spokesperson on industry matters in the FNQ region.

### The Commercial Fishing Industry in Far North Queensland

The commercial fishing industry is the region's third largest industry and Cairns boasts the largest fishing fleet in Australia. It employs 1600 people and injects approximately \$200 million each year into the local economy. The local industry is a major contributor to Australia's \$2.2 billion seafood exports.

Issues relating to employment that need addressing:

- A perception that the seafood industry is in decline. Whilst the wild catch sector faces continued restructuring the value of the industry is ever increasing as we see Cairns play a greater role in processing and on selling seafood imported from PNG and the South Pacific. Seafood exports through the Cairns International Airport have been growing at the rate of about 30% per annum over the past three years.
- The growth can be attributed to relatively new export markets for coral trout, tuna and mackerel.
- Processors have or are investing about \$15 million in new infrastructure over the current financial year.
- Australian fisheries are amongst the best managed in the world and as such have a prosperous future ahead of them.

- The relevant national training packages are not responsive to industry needs. (e.g. diving not catered for)
- The Seafood and Transport and Distribution packages need to be aligned.
- Training needs have to be addressed at a regional level.
- Need for more flexibility within TAFE.
- Appropriate standards – STCW95

Issues relating to restructuring need to be addressed:

- Structural adjustment is rarely supported by Governments.
- For example the current Draft Coral Reef Fin Fish Management Plan makes no mention of compensation or structural adjustment and therefore gives no consideration to how the State will seek to minimise the serious socio-economic impacts the plan will have up and down the Queensland coast, as a result of reducing the current catch by more than a third. The Government needs to appreciate the true extent of the impacts the proposed plan will have on the lives of fishers, their families and those others who rely on them for their survival. The plan will cost Queensland about \$30 million per annum of predominately export revenue and at least 300 jobs.
- Governments have four principal means for alleviating the adverse employment and personal financial impacts of structural adjustment.

First, they can help to stimulate private-sector employment generally by pursuing sound macro-economic and structural policies; such economy –wide approaches can be vitally important in the long run.

Second, they can use active labour-market programmes (through retraining and other programmes) in order to help the unemployed find new jobs.

Third, they can apply passive labour market policies to support displaced workers during unemployment and reduce personal financial losses. Lump-sum payments and early retirement schemes fall under this category.

Finally, they can try to moderate the pace of adjustment in a way that spreads out the impacts over time.

- In Australia all that we've focused on is the lump sum payment to achieve fisheries based ESD outcomes. We have totally disregarded any of the other solutions. In dealing with the employment impacts of the transition to sustainable fishing, policy-makers will find themselves confronted with many challenges. They will need to address the social welfare implications of changes in catch levels and any redistribution of access rights, especially in those rural communities and households that are hardest hit by these changes and who have the fewest options of adjustment.
- For them, some form of social assistance (if they are not already covered by normal unemployment insurance) may be warranted, in addition to job placement and counselling services.
- Norway has employed both on-going and time-limited social and labour market policies in its fisheries sector.
- *Special provisions* have been made for fishers in the areas of pensions, unemployment insurance and sickness benefits. The financing of these

schemes comes partly from contributions made by employees and employers in the industry, and partly by the Government. Three major programmes form the nucleus of social insurance in the harvesting sub-sector.

- A *special unemployment insurance* scheme for fishers provides cash benefits in the event that a fishing vessel is idled – *e.g.* owing to loss of ship, repairs, ice, sickness among the crew, on-land strikes among fish receivers, or because the fishermen have been made redundant.
- A *special early retirement pension* scheme provides income support for fishers between the ages of 60 and 66.
- Fishers and vessel owners are able to obtain a *minimum income guarantee* if income from their fishing activities falls below a certain threshold. Several conditions are attached to the measure.